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THE LANGUAGE PROBLEM IN INDIA

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(1) Why is there a language problem in India ?

India is a Federation of many States, each with a language of its own. The language problem of India is manifold, but the following aspects of it are of the greatest immediate importance : (i) What should be the language of communication and instruction within a state ? (ii) What should be the language of inter-state communication, of the Central Legislatures, the Central Secretariat and All-India Services, in other words, what should be the language of the Union ? (iii) What should be our means of communication with the outside world ?

(2) Can India not solve its problem by referring to the example of the other multi-lingual states in the world ?

India's cultural and political situation is not entirely comparable with the other multi-lingual states in the world and so their example is not of much use for us. The uniqueness of the Indian situation will become clear from the brief account of three prominent multi-lingual states given below :

(a) The United States of America receives people of almost all languages of the World and yet has a unilingual state. The historical and cultural differences between the U. S. and India are too obvious to need clarification. The U. S. was at first predominantly an English colony. The few Dutch, French and Spanish settlers were very soon swamped by the westward march of the English colonists. The recent populations have entered the States after the U. S. was already established as an English-speaking state. The new populations come as small, uprooted groups seeking

NOTE:—The author alone is responsible for the views expressed in this article.

asylum and are willing and even anxious to conform to the set linguistic pattern. Even so, linguistic islands remain and are tolerated only because such languages do not claim any political recognition in the state.

(b) Switzerland has three languages and has solved the problem by giving equal status to all the three. (Recently they have added a fourth, the Romansch.) This could be done because there are only three languages and not 14 as in India. The state is small and the languages belong to one linguistic family, so that they can be understood with a little effort by each group.

(c) The U. S. S. R. is a vast multi-lingual state. They have solved the problem by making Russian the federal or the Union language and the language of each state is the language of communication and instruction within that state.

The situations in the U. S. S. R. and India seem to be analogous and the Indian solution is also similar; but in reality there are fundamental differences between the Russian and Indian situations and so the present solution is far from satisfactory.

In Russia Russian-speaking people were the dominant ruling race for centuries. Russian was the language of higher education, culture, literature and science. Russian is today also the language in which the present political ideology was hammered out and given a definite shape in the U. S. S. R. Though Karl Marx and Engels wrote in German the foremost exponents of the theory, Lenin, Bukharin, Stalin and others all wrote in Russian. Russian is thus the cultural, political and historical language of the people of the U. S. S. R. No other language in the U. S. S. R. has a history and literature comparable to that of Russian and hence it was but natural that it should be the federal language. The Russian rulers showed their broad-mindedness and imagination in raising the status of the languages of the various States and making them the languages for all instruction including the highest, within each State.

In India on the other hand, the northern Sanskritic languages are, all of them more or less on par. They arose about a thousand years ago as separate languages from the then-prevalent Prakrit languages and each developed with a literature of its own. I venture to state that Bengali, Marathi and Gujarati are more developed and possess a greater and richer literature than the other languages like Sindhi, Punjabi, Rajastani, Hindi and Uriya. Though the number of people speaking Hindi seems to be larger than the number speaking any other language in India, it is backward as regards the quantity and quality of the literature it has. This was probably due to the fact that the Hindi-speaking region was dominated by Muslim rulers from the 13th century and while the ordinary people cultivated the various dialects, the classes who had dealings with the Muslim state took to Persian, and from the 19th century, to Urdu. Hindi cannot be said to have ever been an inspiration even to northern linguistic areas as regards religious, philosophical or political thought or even in the field of literature.

As regards the South, the Dravidian languages have a literary record, both brilliant and long. Tamil literature dates long before the literature of the modern western European languages. Tamil, Telugu and Kannad were developed long before the modern northern Indian languages. They have a vigorous literary tradition, coupled with a tradition of religious and philosophical movements which have influenced all India.

Under these circumstances, the Russian analogy breaks down completely. Linguistic groups in India, who have a proud literary and political record cannot accept with equanimity the predominance given to Hindi, which appears to be only a parvenu speech.

Yet another consideration shows the difference between the Russian and Indian situation. Russian being the federal language, there is naturally a predominance of Russian-speaking people in the administrative machinery of the

state. This fact is not resented by other states, because as compared to the Russian-speaking part of the U. S. S. R., all of them were at a comparatively primitive level of culture, almost all of them being without a written literature. The proportion of Russian-speaking people in the U. S. S. R. is very considerably higher than the proportion of Hindi-speaking people in India.

The position of the Hindi-speaking region has already been depicted. All the other states are equal or superior to the Hindi-speaking area and would resent the enormous advantage in the domains of both political and cultural advancement which Hindi-speaking people will get if Hindi becomes the federal language and therefore also the language of all competitive examinations. This would be a great injustice to all people in India whose mother-tongue is not Hindi. Hindi has all the plums without having done anything to deserve them, and what hurts the sensibilities of the non-Hindi population is the attitude that any word against Hindi is almost equivalent to high treason.

(3) The clarification of the Indian cultural, historical and cultural situation :

The situation as regards native Indian languages has been elucidated above to a certain extent. However the historical process during the last 900 years needs to be briefly sketched to understand the linguistic problem.

In about 1100 A. D. the Turks came into India, bringing with them the Muslim religion and the Persian culture. They came as raiders and conquerors and then settled down as zealous convertors of the native population to the new religion.

Muslim rule spread from North-West to the rest of India. Some parts of India were under that rule for 700 years before the British came, while some were under their yoke hardly 200 years and had gained independence a few centuries before the British established themselves in India.

At no time was there an overall centralised rule of one Muslim Dynasty in the country. Though this long contact could not but modify Hindu thought and social institutions, the modification was almost minimal.

British rule lasted barely 200 years; but its effect on Indian thought and social institutions was far greater and deeper than the actual time-span would lead one to expect. For the first time in the recorded history of India, the country was governed as one state, with one central judicial and executive power. Though Indian social and religious institutions were left theoretically untouched, contact with western technology and literature through English was a great force for change. The Missionaries carried on their work of proselytization, but it was not so much in the religious as in the social and political spheres that India was profoundly affected by the British rule. The Indian struggle for freedom, the Indian Constitution, the acceptance of democratic principles, the doctrine of equality for all citizens, the welfare state and socialism have no parallels in ancient Indian history. All these ideas are the direct result of the British rule.

English also became the language of the educated and the medium of inter-provincial intercourse. It was the inspiration for reform and for the fight for freedom. Further, it was uniformly adopted as the medium for higher education throughout India. Unlike Urdu, which was adopted in the middle of the 18th century by some classes in a few provinces directly influenced by Muslim rule, English was taken up in all provinces of India. It was learnt eagerly for the new ideas and culture which it conveyed as also for the sake of the jobs which were open to English-knowing persons. So by the time India gained independence, most of the educated people in each province spoke English in addition to their own mother-tongue. The social and political thought embodied in English literature has passed into our most cherished cultural possession through our

Constitution and through the unity of India, which never before was a single state.

(4) A suggestion for the settlement of the linguistic problem.

The following solution, I feel, should fulfil the demand of political unity on the one hand and linguistic and cultural equality of the constituent states on the other.

(a) There can be no two opinions about the necessity of giving instruction to a person through his mother-tongue. That is the only natural medium for a child and an adult to learn. If in Russia, languages, which had not even a script, could develop enough to undertake all education, certainly the developed languages in India can do so immediately. The lack of text-books should be no hindrance. That lack will be made good rapidly as soon as the demand arises.

In each linguistic state therefore all instruction from the primary school stage to the highest University degree must be through the language of the region. (In contact regions and cities with mixed populations, adequate provision can be made for schools in the languages other than the language of the state. These are particulars which can be worked out later, once the principles of the present thesis are accepted.) Within the state the language of the state shall be used for all administrative purposes and all employees of the state must have a knowledge of that language. The facility to learn through the mother tongue will help to spread education to the masses and accelerate all programmes of social and economic welfare. This arrangement naturally presupposes linguistic states and ensures equality to all major languages.

(b) and (c). The next two aspects of the problem can be treated together. We want a language to carry on all the administration of the Union Government, a language for inter-state communication and a language for commu-

nication with the rest of the world. All these three needs can be satisfied if we choose English as the language for all these three purposes. We shall have thus two classes of languages in India (i) the languages of the states, numbering about 13 and (ii) the language of the Union, viz. English.

It has already been stated above, that all instruction of an Indian citizen should be through one of the languages belonging to group (i). English, as the language of the Union should be taught in schools as a compulsory second language from the middle school onwards till graduation through college. The aim of such teaching should not be literary expression, but the ability to write simple English correctly and to read English books. For all Union services only, the examinations should be through English. No school under any circumstances should be allowed to use English as the medium of instruction.

A new inter-provincial and inter-state caste of Government servants and other well-to-do people is emerging in India. Children of this class are sent to schools where the medium of instruction is English. Such schools are managed by foreigners (mostly missionaries), who have neither knowledge of nor pride in Indian literature, philosophy or religious thought. These children are brought up in a cultureless atmosphere and because of their mastery over the English language, do well in the all-India competitive examinations, to become administrators and rulers of people. This state of affairs must not continue. Every citizen of India must have his cultural roots in at least one of the linguistic states in India. The position of English should not be that of the other native Indian languages.

This arrangement will eliminate in a short time these anomalous groups in India, who try to give out English as their mother-tongue, and also the power and insidious propaganda of schools conducted by foreign missionaries. With full religious freedom, the anglo-Indians and Christians

will become truly Indianised by having one of the regional languages as their mother-tongue.

The choice of English as the Union language gives equal opportunities to people of all states. Under the present provisions of the Constitution, non-Hindi persons, aspiring to get into the higher services would have to learn three languages, their mother-tongue, Hindi and English. According to my proposal, this hardship will be avoided for all people in India. Only those ambitious few who want to enter the Union and overseas services will appear for the appropriate examinations to be given through the English language, while the aspirations of a very large mass of people will be fulfilled by having access to all the state services including the highest by passing examinations only through their mother-tongue. English will have a place in our national life, but it will be on purely utilitarian considerations and English will not compete with the regional languages as regards their cultural value.

This compromise will most probably meet with approval from many, except perhaps the Hindi-speaking people and those sentimentalists who think Indian patriotism can be exhibited only by adoption of an Indian language as the language of the Union. I would further suggest, that in order to promote inter-state intercourse and deeper appreciation of the literary achievements of the different languages, all languages, both in the Sanskritic and Dravidian groups should have a common script.

Addendum:—The resistance to the English language arises because we tend to look upon it as the language of our latest conquerors and forget that it is today the most important language of the world and is spoken by many people besides the English.